

Response noted, not appreciated

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PUTRAJAYA: Lee Kuan Yew's "apology" over remarks he made about Malaysian Chinese received lukewarm response from the country's top leader.

There was no rush to welcome his comments or a gush of rhetoric about long-standing bilateral ties surviving this bad blip.

Instead, the reaction from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was terse and economical — meant to show that though the government was not interested in prolonging the issue, it was unimpressed with Lee's statement.

Today, the Cabinet may make known its collective position on the statement. But the general feeling among politicians is that a large portion of the statement is self-serving.

Lee said in a letter to the Prime Minister that he was sorry for the "great deal of discomfort" caused by his claim that the Chinese in Malaysia were being systematically marginalised.

He said that when he made those remarks at a forum on the sidelines of the International Monetary Fund/World Bank meeting last month, he had no intention of meddling in Malaysian politics.

His comments were meant to illustrate that Singapore needs a strong majority government to de-

fend its interests, particularly in maintaining good relations with Indonesia and Malaysia.

Abdullah tersely acknowledged the letter.

"I received his letter and I understand the contents of the letter... I have taken note of it.

"But I feel the statement that he made was uncalled for and not appreciated," he said.

"I certainly do not agree with the

statement and reject its premise."

His mood changed visibly when reporters asked him for a reaction to the letter.

When pressed further on whether he accepted Lee's apology, he repeated: "I have taken note of it."

In his letter, Lee said that he did not have the power to influence politics in Malaysia or to incite the feelings of the Chinese here.

"Let me sum it up nicely, why you must have a government in Singapore which is really firm, stout-hearted, subtle and resolute. My neighbours both have problems with their Chinese. They are successful, they are hardworking and, therefore, they are systematically marginalized, even in education. There are quotas to prevent you. So, you've got to make money to go abroad or go to one of the private universities which are being set up. And they want Singapore, to put it simply, to be like their Chinese, compliant. So, every time, we say 'No' to some scheme to knock down the Causeway and build a bridge, he says, 'Oh, you're not cooperative, you're only thinking of yourself'. For no rhyme or reason, we knock down a causeway, nearly 100 years old, which served us well.

He wants to build a bridge because it looks pretty and he says ships will sail and his containers can move from the East Coast to the West Coast via this. But we saw no... So, we said, "All right, if you give us commensurate benefits, we'll agree". But you need a government who'll be able to, not only have the gumption, but the skill to say, 'No' in a very quiet, polite way that doesn't provoke them into doing something silly."

"Irrespective of whatever reasons he has said, such a statement can incite the feelings of the races," Abdullah said. "We have to ensure such a statement is not repeated."

Energy, Water and Communications Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said he shared Abdullah's sentiments on the matter.

Entrepreneur and Co-operative Development Minister Datuk Seri

Khaled Nordin said that the republic must show that it was serious in sustaining the improved bilateral relations.

"What do you expect us to do other than demand an explanation? What should we do if they come with an 'apology' like that? Go to war with them?"

"We just hope that Singapore is more careful next time in making statements," he said.